

ROSE-FINCHES AND OTHER BIRDS OF THE
WARDWAN VALLEY.

BY

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(*With 6 plates*).

To anyone interested in bird study I can thoroughly recommend a trip through the upper Wardwan Valley in the Kashmir province of Kishtwar. Last year, feeling it to be high time to try my luck with birds breeding at the higher elevations, I took two months' leave from June 15th, but in view of our experiences, set forth in the following account, I would advise an earlier start, say June 1st at the latest.

We chose Achhabal as our base, motoring direct from Jammu over the Banihal and meeting servants and kit there on the afternoon of June 18th. On the 22nd we took the Kishtwar trail but on coming over the first gali into sight of the Sinton Pass we bore off to the left, finally camping at Gurdraman in the park-like Upper Naubug Valley, an easy but definitely hot march. After a day's halt we pushed on, meaning to camp at 10,000 ft. for a week on a marg called Naokan where I hoped to get my eye in in preparation for the birds of the Wardwan.

The least said about that camp the better. We hunted for a patch of clean level ground for an hour and a half. Eventually we had to pitch the tent at a fearsome angle which entailed a restless night, being prevented from rolling out of bed only by the judiciously stacked store boxes. Shortly before dark the wind veered into the West immediately filling the air with the horrid stench of putrefying flesh; a dead cow was found forty yards distant in the midst of a patch of viburnum. Seven of the coolies with the aid of a rope soon trundled the carcass down the steep hillside, leaving it where we hoped it would do its worst on the Gujars and Bakribans whose flocks had befouled the only level spots.

It would have been a good place for birds, but we left it the next morning with no regrets. A noisy pair of Variegated Laughing Thrushes in the viburnum bushes saw us off and in a small patch of juniper I found a Hedge-Sparrow's nest with one fresh egg in it. It was an interesting and to begin with a thoroughly enjoyable march but take heed and put not your faith in the half-inch map. It was constructed by a humourist who put a little note in the margin 'Inshan 6 miles'. And so it may be, as the crow flies, but at the end of the day we reckoned we had tramped little short of 20 miles, exclusive of playing about for a couple of hours on the summit of the Margan Pass.

A two thousand foot climb up a fairly steep boulder-strewn slope had brought us to a heavenly two mile stretch of almost level marshy ground. The meadows were covered with blue and

white anemones, buttercups and a blue corydalis. Round the marshes bright yellow trollius and rose primulas were much in evidence. Straight ahead a fine series of snowy peaks proclaimed Nun Kun, while on our right a further two thousand feet of steep slope was stippled in shaded stretches of vast extent with the tiny cream flowers of the dwarf *Rhododendron anthopogon*. Marmots shrilled from every patch of rocks making the dogs quite wild with excitement, while for me there were birds in plenty. I disturbed a flock of feeding Rose-Finches. It was to cope with Rose-Finches in particular that I had chosen the Wardwan.

It was 6 p.m. before we got down to the river after tramping round bare shadeless spurs for six or eight miles at an elevation of never less than 11,000 ft. before coming to the abrupt drop through the forest to Inshan. The only redeeming feature was that we came on a primula new to us, the charming white *Primula involucrata* which grew in little clusters in damp spots between the spurs.

On reaching the Wardwan river we hailed with joy the news that upstream was the last forest hut in the valley. Warily we dragged ourselves the extra mile and a half and took possession, thankful to get out of pitching the tents.

At this point, and in fact for most of its length, the Upper Wardwan is a comparatively open wide vale. Villages are spaced at increasing intervals as far as Suknes. Up to there the stony soil is tilled with but fair success, rice being imported in exchange for home-spun blankets to supplement the insufficient crops. Above the point we had reached, to work the dwindling forests is no longer an economical proposition, but I confess that did not depress me; it is a grand country for birds.

In the mornings the pine wood sheltering the F.R.H. was filled with their voices. In front of the hut was a 'kuth' nursery, the ripening heads of which attracted many Goldfinches. Kashmir Sooty Flycatchers were exceedingly common: I marked down four nests within a hundred yards radius. Two pairs of Blue-headed Rock-Thrushes lived near by but the young ones had just left their nests, one of which I found—of pine needles as usual—tucked into the buttress roots of a tall tree. We were also visited by those mysterious Red-browed Finches but if they had nests, as usual they were not giving away their positions. Meadow Buntings were common both within and without the forest. One pair actually had a family of large young ones, fifteen feet from the ground in a thick fir tree. In the fields a few pairs of Larks were often singing, but Greenfinches were the most numerous birds in the open lands.

By the side of a stream I obtained some good photos of a White-capped Redstart, whose nest we found on June 27th with large young ones in it. I was also most successful with a Himalayan Turtle Dove which had built a scanty nest of roots only a foot from the ground on some brushwood at the foot of a sappling in a small spinney. The light seemed hopeless in such a sheltered position but the bird sat still enough for time exposures.

The most interesting birds of all however were by the river.



Photo:

R. S. P. Bates

KASHMIR SOOTY FLYCATCHER (*Hemichelidon sibirica gulmergi*).
Wurjwan, 8300 feet, 1st July, 1937.



Photo:

R. S. P. Bates

DELTA AT JUNCTION OF BASMEN NULLAH WITH WARDWAN RIVER WHERE LARGE NUMBERS OF HODGSON'S

Around Inshan and for a few miles upstream there are many bush-covered islands with stony margins. Some were easily accessible and of considerable size. Grey and Hodgson's Pied Wagtails and Sandpipers galore were naturally the commonest denizens here, but it was not long before I realized that the strange Ibisbill was by no means rare. For some days I watched four pairs of these curious birds but eventually I was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that their nidification was over for the year, in spite of the fact that they used to fly backwards and forwards crying peevishly whenever we invaded their particular haunts.

On one occasion, on July 9th, while searching one of the largest islands, I came upon a Japanese Wryneck feeding young ones in a crevice near the top of a thirty foot tree. Stepping back into the cover of some bushes in order to watch it unobserved, I almost fell over a down-covered young Himalayan Brown Wood Owl. It could only fly a few yards at a time so must have been reared on the island. While photographing it, one of the parents arrived using the most obnoxious language.

On June 26th I thought I was at last to be permitted to photograph a Monal Pheasant at the nest but returning to erect the hiding tent not half an hour after Guffara, the Shikari, had discovered it, we found the eggs gone. A search resulted in the recovery of a piece of wet shell beneath a stump 40 yards distant. A thieving Jungle Crow was probably responsible for the disaster. There had been only three eggs in it, but we found the stained remnants of two others in a leaf-filled hollow 10 ft. below the nest which was on a steep forest-clad hillside between two close-growing pine trees where undergrowth was conspicuous by its absence.

The day after arriving at Wurjwan I noticed a Buzzard circling above our wood, and a couple of days later picked up half an egg-shell a hundred yards behind the hut. I was not therefore particularly surprised to come across a fledgeling on June 30th sitting not fifteen feet up on a dead branch just as I was turning into the wood. It was quite unafraid and I doubt if it had been twenty-four hours out of the nest. Next day I shot it, its death being unfortunately necessary in order to determine the breeding race of the North-West Himalayas. That problem is now solved satisfactorily but to fathom what name this race should bear is evidently a harder task.

The only other bird I photographed with fair success at Wurjwan was a Skylark. On alarm it was amazingly quick in its movements and although I pressed the release when its bill was inside a young one's gape, the photograph shows the head up and the wings commencing to open.

On July 11th we moved to Basmen about eight miles further up the valley at approximately the same elevation, 8,500 ft. Within an hour of starting we passed through the most charming glade just short of Tsuidraman village. It looked the most delightful of camping spots and I was sorely tempted to curtail the march.

We reached Basmen early, so while setting the camp in order and while my wife was ministering to the needs of the halt and the maimed and the pathetic little ill gujar babies brought in by

their trusting parents, I sent the shikari out to prospect. He returned with the most amazing news. He had found a nest of the Simla Streaked Laughing-Thrush with three eggs in it and seven other nests, all, he said, containing blue eggs with black spots on them. Had we come up with the Rose-Finches at this low elevation? We certainly had. Within the next couple of days we must have found a score of nests of this, Hodgson's Rose-Finch, which was excessively common breeding in bushes of various kinds from about $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 7 feet from the ground. Most of them were pretty well concealed but I saw two quite exposed in willows and one on the outer edge of a wild rose-bush. The eggs were incubated; I was quite unable to find fresh ones. All these birds must have finished laying about the last week in June. Some of them contained only three eggs, the majority four. I managed to obtain one photograph with both parents at the nest. The male seemed bent on feeding his three newly-hatched chicks on regurgitated seeds but the female swallowed all his offerings, thereafter proceeding to bring them up as required for the next half hour when more fully digested.

The reason for this concentration of Rose-Finches is evident from the photograph taken as we were leaving Basmen. Here a side river of considerable importance flows into the Wardwan, and as the valley at this point is comparatively wide and flat, it has formed a considerable delta. Every channel is bordered by willows, the islands and strips of land between being at times densely clothed with bushes of many kinds. Nowhere else either up or down the valley did I see any spot like it. However, Rose-Finches were by no means uncommon from here upwards breeding mostly in tall weeds and bracken. Amongst the bushes in the Basmen delta was a delightful small-leaved rose-bush bearing deep yellow single blooms. A double white cottage rose was also not uncommon.

At Basmen we had pitched the tent amongst some boulders a little way up the side nullah to get away from the village. Alas we were intruders on the preserve of a pigmy hare—a quaint reddish-fronted little chap the size of a guinea pig. Nothing daunted by our intrusion he used to waggle his whiskers at us from the top of a rock close to the tent door. I was actually able to take four photographs of him, the last at only $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Twice in spite of the dogs I found him nibbling grass inside the bathroom portion of our canvas home.

On July 17th we moved up a thousand feet to Suknes, the very last hamlet in the valley. The headman wished us to camp on a hilltop overlooking his village, but fortunately we made for the opposite side of the river, the left bank, where there were still a few woods and hopes of an uncontaminated water supply. We crossed the tumultuous river by a rickety wooden bridge of the usual type and explored some barren fields along the edge of a steep wood commencing in clumps of deciduous trees—a charming piece of country. Finding only one rather muddy trickle of water we moved up half a mile over a long spur and found ourselves in a charming little side valley which did not begin its